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The Indirect Approach In The Cold War

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The purpose of this essay is to discuss the use of the indirect approach by Cold War belligerents as a means to accomplish their war aims. To address this issue, one must begin with the following assumptions: (1) the origins of the Cold War stemmed not only from fundamental differences between ideologies, but also from deeply rooted historical notions held by the belligerents about their opponents (2) that rational statesmen consciously and logically applied some type or types of strategy to achieve war objectives (3) that the Cold War has ended (4) that one side or the other emerged as the "Victor."

At the conclusion of WW II, the absence of the German threat which had forged a temporary and unnatural partnership between the US and Russia, caused a re-focusing of attention on pre-war differences between political views and economic systems embraced by the two countries. Given the misperceptions held by the two countries as to the reasons for the other's actions, the tendency by both to view relationships with a mirror image, and an inability to get into the opponent's mind, efforts to solve these differences were doomed to be governed by a framework of East-West conflict over the next five decades. The inevitability of the continuation of US-USSR pre-war conflict stemmed from the fact that although there was a basic agreement in the pursuit of Germany's defeat, the victors had not reconciled their own peace objectives well enough to ensure that the achievement of the common military aim supported post-war political and

economic goals of the two obviously different, but temporarily allied, political systems.

To solve this inevitable conflict, the US and the Soviet Union had three available courses of action: (1) do nothing, and maintain the post-war *status quo* (2) continue armed conflict to seek the destruction of each other's armed forces in the truest Clausewitzian sense (3) resume pre-war ideological competition using instruments of statecraft to pursue post-war political goals, while avoiding direct confrontation with the opponent's military forces. The decision makers were unsure of the likely outcome of direct conflict, and they were dissatisfied with the *status quo* since such a condition eliminated the possibility of achieving conflicting post-war political objectives. Therefore, leaders in both states selected course of action number three, the strategy of the indirect approach.

The problem for the West was how to apply an indirect approach in dealing with the Soviet center of gravity, a huge army in Eastern Europe poised in a menacing fashion against Western Europe and backed by an ideology promising world domination and the eventual destruction of capitalist systems and Western values. The objective was to hold the USSR in check until it abandoned its threatening ideology, withdrew from Europe, or demonstrated friendlier intent. To accomplish that objective, the West would spend the next five decades implementing and modifying George Kennan's plan for containing the USSR politically, economically, militarily.

and morally, while using diplomatic and ideological leverage to sculpt the final outcome of WW II into free and independent European states with a reduced or eliminated presence of the Red Army.

Simultaneously, Russia faced the problem of how to rebuild its weak and war-torn economy, achieve its traditional goal of seeking great power status, while proselytizing an ideology that threatened the existence of the rest of the world's political and economic systems. The Russians viewed Western encirclement of the Motherland as threatening and dangerous. In using an indirect approach, the Soviets hoped to drain the West of its will to resist the march of socialism and to weaken or eliminate the West's center of gravity--the European alliance structure, ultimately known as NATO.

In defining the indirect approach, B.H. Liddell Hart states that strategy is not necessarily required to be oriented on the overthrow of the opponent's military power. Hart says that when a government appreciates that the enemy has the military superiority, either in general or in a particular theater, it may wisely enjoin a strategy of limited aim. Thus, course of action number two (direct confrontation), mentioned at the beginning of this paper, was not selected by decision makers because neither side could be sure of defeating the other.

The US doubted its conventional capabilities against the Soviet Army mass, while the Soviets were unsure of US self-

discipline in avoiding the escalation of a conventional conflict to the nuclear level. These doubts were not groundless. The Red Army had already proven to be a juggernaut by rolling over approximately two hundred and twenty five German divisions on the Russian/German front in some of the fiercest fighting of the war, and the US had already demonstrated a willingness to unleash the nuclear genie in battle. Thus, the means chosen by each country were suitable and logical according to Hart's method of indirectness.

One of the key features of the indirect approach is that limited aim strategies are intended to buy time while waiting for a change in the balance of forces by creating a disproportionate drain on the opponent than on one's own strength. According to Hart, this can be accomplished by draining the enemy's force while weakening him by "pricks" instead of risking "direct blows." In the context of the Cold War, limited aim strategies on both sides were designed to weaken the opposition's military, economic, and political systems until the balance of forces was such that enough leverage could be brought to bear by either side to cause a failure in one or all of those systems, particularly as they pertained to the adjustment of the post-WW II *status quo*.

The adoption of the indirect approach by the US and USSR, also demonstrated an understanding of the necessity to adjust ends to means. Both sides initially had the actual power to eliminate the other's military force to achieve

post-war goals, but such power was deemed inappropriate by the players. The US adhered to a self-imposed ban on using war-winning atomic weapons in spite of its monopoly over that technology, while the Soviets could not unleash their Red Army juggernaut for fear of becoming a nuclear target. As a result, each side selected temporary, or intermediate, ends for which the means were available and which ultimately contributed to the achievement of the final goal. The US focused on the application of its economic and moral strengths while applying limited military resources in a counter-force role. The Soviets concentrated on "liberating oppressed peoples" and supporting client states in the establishment of Marxist governments.

Hart noted that one could not lose sight of the final goal and that the establishment of intermediate objectives must support the final one in order not to waste energy or resources. The strategies of containment, deterrence, detente, peaceful co-existence, and wars of national liberation all contributed to the accomplishment of the final goals through intermediate ends, and demonstrated the proper adjustment of the end to means.

Another of Hart's major points in the application of means and selection of ends is to choose a path of least expectation. The Cuban missile crisis best exemplifies this idea. The US did not expect to see nuclear missiles in its back yard. By attempting to place nuclear missiles in Cuba, the Soviets were threatening alternate objectives and

attacking the weakness of the US air defense underbelly. In addition, the US was placed upon the horns of the proverbial dilemma because it had to risk nuclear war to prevent the deployment of the missiles or permit the deployment and become more vulnerable in a nuclear war. Until then, the US had no real reason to offer resistance there or expect a major Soviet military presence in the Caribbean, except as a possible threat to the Panama Canal. The Soviets seized the initiative and capitalized on that low expectation. On the other hand, the move by the US to "unhinge" China did much to put the Soviets off balance in Europe by causing doubts about their Asian flank in the event of a war with the West. As Hart would say, the line of least expectation often produces the most fruitful results and contributes to the opponent's psychological demise.

Based upon the above examples, it is easy to see why Hart said that flexibility in plans and force dispositions is needed to be able to react to changing enemy objectives or dispositions. Both sides in the Cold War were constantly selecting alternate objectives and implementing contingencies to parry the opponent's moves. When the Soviets failed in one "liberation" effort, they went to another. From the Berlin blockade to Afghanistan, Soviet objectives were flexible and imaginative. On the other side, the US was just as creative. From the Marshall Plan to the use of military counter-force, to its stand on the human rights and self determination issues, the US demonstrated equal

flexibility and determination in parrying Soviet expansion efforts.

Neither side chose ends which pitted strength against strength. However, both sides seemed to ignore Hart's warning not to pursue efforts that failed once. The erection of the Berlin Wall partially succeeded where the Berlin blockade had failed. The Soviets continued to apply pressure in the Mid-East in spite of some failures there, and the US continued to work for the freedom of East European states in spite of several major set-backs in that arena.

Finally, the essence of the indirect approach, in Hart's view, is the strategy of using economy of force to diminish resistance, thus deterring, and not fighting. Both the US and the Soviets were successful in the application of this strategy as it pertained to nuclear deterrence. However, both managed to tax the other's conventional resources in regional conflicts, such as Vietnam and Afghanistan, while avoiding direct conflict between their own troops--even at the low intensity level.

Hart says that the objectives of a nation must be achieved by a grand strategy which coordinates the elements of statecraft toward the attainment of those objectives. It is the grand strategy which looks beyond the war to the subsequent peace. If the orchestration of combat power, financial strength, diplomatic and commercial pressures, and ethical forces do not all contribute toward the final objective, then the statesman has failed.. If the

synchronization of the above elements does not add to the betterment of the peace, "even if only from your own point of view," then the grand strategist has failed. The fact that the US was taken by surprise by the rapid disintegration of the Eastern block and was ill prepared to deal with its collapse indicates that the object had not been properly adjusted beyond the original end. Here, the West performed poorly and perhaps responded incorrectly because it is still fumbling to establish an objective beyond the apparent collapse of the Soviet system.

In conclusion: Who, then, won the Cold War?

In the Cold War, the US played the non-conquest, conservative state role, whose aims were its own security through the defense of Europe, the reduction of the Soviet Army/Warsaw Pact threat, and freedom for Eastern Europe. The USSR played the acquisitive state role, whose aims were the defense of the homeland through the removal of the US from Europe, neutralization of Germany and NATO, opportunities for economic betterment, and the advancement of socialist doctrine. According to the logic of the indirect approach, the conservative state's (US) aim is fulfilled (it wins) if the threat is removed and if the enemy is led to abandon his purpose. Thus, it would seem that the US has won the Cold War. In this case, however, conservative and acquisitive states are both winners, but only partially. The Warsaw Pact is a doubtful player in any future armed conflict. The US defense budget is scheduled for drastic

cuts. NATO is cutting its military strength by huge numbers. The new Germany is temporarily paying to support thousands of Soviet soldiers awaiting transfer from their former East zone posts, and Germany is simultaneously reducing its own armed forces. Eastern Bloc nations are busy re-discovering themselves, and the US and Soviets have successfully deterred attacks against home territories by the other.

The real winner of the Cold War must be determined in the next 30-50 years after peace objectives are met, assuming that the US and Soviets adjust their grand strategies along the way to account for the recent changes in East-West competition. At that point, it will be clear which country really understood the indirect strategy and which one won the Cold War; however, the present inability to chose a final winner lends credence to the notion that the indirect approach may *never* produce an ultimate solution because of the inconclusive nature of the strategy itself. But, as Clausewitz says: "In war the result is never final."